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THE NEW PATH.

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TRUTH IN ART.

No. 6.] "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are,
and the things that shall be hereafter." [Oct., 1863.

FALLACIES OF THE PRESENT SCHOOL.

AMONG the present painters in this country there is perhaps, originally, much deep, pure, healthy love of nature, and a great deal of sincerity and earnestness; but they inherit the mistaken ideas of art which are the fault of the influences under which they are educated. These false ideas gradually destroy the purity of their love of nature; for a pure and devoted love of nature leads to keener perception and more thorough representation of her truths.

The out-door studies of these men are infinitely more faithful and valuable than any of their pictures which are painted in the studio: and as a general rule, their early studies are better than their later ones. Their perception of truth, instead of growing more and more refined and subtle, becomes on the other hand more and more coarse and false. This is the natural result of their training; it comes of that prevailing notion that artists must necessarily alter and arrange everything according to certain principles of art.

It is indeed true that in this, like most errors, lies couched a truth: but the truth is made of no effect by misapplication. It is supposed, and young artists are taught that they must try to compose and arrange—they must give us the ideal. Now the

root of the whole error lies in supposing that they must try to do anything more or less than to give the *exact truth* of what they see. The true ideal is based upon, and grows out of, the real. It is the artist's first duty to be true to the real. He may be sure that the greatness is in the thing that God has made, and if he keeps his heart and eyes open it may please God to reveal it to him. If he studies faithfully, he will see in nature, shape after shape of delicate tracing and subtle gradation; which, the more it is loved, the more it reveals. As the perceptions are cultivated, the more exhaustless God's work is seen to be; so that no true lover of nature can ever look away from her for the ideal. The true and noble ideal comes of that penetrating perception which, by love and long discipline, sees at once the most essential qualities of things and records these with emphasis. Such perception is not possible to all men; it is perception of the heart, a special gift, refined by love and constant watching.

To the passionless observer nature only shows her face; but she answers sympathy with revelations of her soul: yet her soul can only be seen *through* her face. And so whatever a man may be, whether possessing more or less of this high and deep sympathy, he ought to try his utmost to be *real*. Naturalism is the *basis* of all true art, which

is "the expression of man's delight in God's work."

Now the present system of art education is in direct opposition to this; its tendency is to exalt man's work above God's. The modern Pre-Raphaelites are exerting a counter influence on this morbid state of things. They are believers in God and His creation, and love art only as a means of expressing to others their delight.

Of these principles Ruskin says, "the wholesome, happy, and noble, though not noblest—art of simple transcript from nature; into which, so far as our modern Pre-Raphaelitism falls, it will indeed do sacred service in ridding us of the old fallacies and componencies, but cannot itself rise above the level of simple and happy usefulness. So far as it is to be great, it must add—and so far as it is great, has already added—the great imaginative element to all its faithfulness in transcript." This is the exact truth; *we do not believe that mere faithful transcript from nature can ever be the greatest art*: but we believe and positively affirm, that there can never be any degree of greatness without this for a *basis*. The mass of opponents are so blind by prejudice that they do not understand the principles; yet still, are constantly insulting them.

An instance of this unintelligent censure is to be found in a work lately published by Mr. Jarves, called "Art Studies." We quote the following as an example:

"As harmonious relation of accessories to principles is highly important (in art,) no cleverness in details can absolve inattention in this respect. The mis-called Pre-Raphaelites of our time, exaggerating the law of fidelity in parts and losing sight of the broader principles of effect by which particulars are absorbed into large masses, pro-

trude upon the sight with microscopic clearness the near and the distant, delineating the tiniest flower in a wide landscape, of which in nature, it would form, at their point of sight, but an uncertain speck of color, with the minuteness of an isolated object close at hand.

"With them, pebbles and petals are made of equal importance with the human countenance, and the texture of garments with the play of features. Consequently, while conscientiously laborious on the lesser truths and values of nature, they exalt them so high in artistic manipulation and relative position, that they have no commensurate force reserved for more important facts. All things being equally indicated, foregrounds and backgrounds, and middle distance alike distinct and defined, the spectator is as likely to find himself admiring the clever imitation of a cobweb, as taken with the proper motive of the composition."

This is a fair average of the knowledge which exists concerning these principles. If Mr. Jarves has found such specimens of art as he here describes, they were indeed the works of "miscalled Pre-Raphaelites." The *true* Pre-Raphaelites never exalt lesser truths over greater ones; but give each truth as far as possible—its proper relation. It is true that they will not cover their canvasses with meaningless dashes of the brush in order to attract attention to some principal object. They feel the nobleness of the greater truths and paint them with the utmost possible fidelity—truths, not only of external matter, but of the Divine or human spirit within. They feel also the precious loveliness and divinity of the least thing of God's creation and will do their utmost to give it its own right place where God has put it, knowing that if faithfully rendered it

will not make the greater truths any less. They will paint the great mountain in its strength, but will not despise the little flower at its foot for fear of its attracting too much attention.

Such works as Mr. J. speaks of, in which "all things are equally indicated, foregrounds and backgrounds, and middle distance alike distinct and defined," are either mimics by shallow men of what they do not understand, or else the awkward work of students. It would be no more absurd to judge principles of religion by the tenets of individual professors, than to judge principles of art by the works of men who do not know what they are about.

The revival of the Pre-Raphaelite principles is only beginning to dawn, and therefore much that is awkward must be expected before the "perfect day," yet, some works of consummate excellence have been already accomplished. Who feels that the leaves and flowers on the wall in the background of Millais' "Huguenot Lover," detract anything from the expression or superior importance of the figures? Are "pebbles and petals" here "made of equal importance with the human countenance?" or the "texture of garments with the play of the features?" Or in Holman Hunt's picture, is too much attention drawn from the "Light of the World," by the faithful painting of the weeds and fruitless corn?

This criticism of Mr. Jarves shows that his mind is so soaked in conventional doctrines, that his perception of the nobler works of God is secondary to them. Who cannot see that this state of mind is opposed to all true growth? Must not reverence, humility, and love for God and nature be at the root of all art that can flourish? And must not that art which is inspired by vanity and ostentation sink to the ground?

It may be a question with some, whether we have a right to judge art by our opinions of what is true. To this we answer that our opinions are not the standard by which we judge; we judge by *clearly demonstrated facts*, facts, upon which all are agreed. And the difference between us and the present school is, that we see it necessary to give pure facts and nothing else, while they do not.

Truth is a "two-edged sword," and must cut wherever it finds anything to oppose it, and we put the works of others to the same test by which we also expect to be tried.

Naturalism is not *all* we believe in, but we know it must come first. We are called by some "weak mockers of Ruskin," and it is said that our principles are not born of original conviction. Be this as it may, the *principles* are not affected either way. By the mercy of God, Ruskin has been sent to open our eyes and loose the seals of darkness. He has shown us the truth and we thank him and give God the glory; and the truth once clearly shown becomes ours if we will receive it. It also becomes our imperative duty to proclaim it. Of course it will be opposed by men who are considered intelligent in these matters: indeed those who have most knowledge of false art will be our bitterest enemies, because their own self-love blinds them.

It is said that we are bold in setting aside the works of men whom the public have been taught to cherish. This is true; but let it not be supposed that we do this from any spirit of uncharitableness, much less from ignorance. We may feel great respect for men while we must condemn their principles. We also *know* what we do: we have not looked at the principles we condemn, with a prejudiced eye blind

ed by ignorance and conceit, though our opponents would seem to think we have. We have most of us been educated in those principles and have thoroughly understood them; we have "come out from the unclean thing" and intend to be "separate," because it is a sin against God. The world has had enough morbid fiction, it now

needs healthy fact. God's truth must come in and take the place of vanity.

Now in the present school, what there is of love for God and nature, and reverence for, and careful rendering of, truth, will live, and we believe there is much of it; but it must purge itself from falsehood or it will die.

C. H. M.

NATURALISM AND GENIUS.

IN a recent Article* we tried to show that the uninteresting character and small influence of most of our painting are not, as seems to be supposed, the natural condition of the art, but the result of the deliberate refusal of the painters to attempt the representation of natural fact. It seems almost unnecessary to demonstrate that pictures which mean something, which reproduce something worth seeing often, or preserve for us some evanescent beauty, are better worth painting and buying, and more apt in the long run to secure credit and influence to their authors, than the meaningless oblongs of colored canvas which make up nine-tenths of our popular art. And indeed we have been gratified to find that many of our readers have rightly understood what we meant to say, and think with us, that a picture ought always to represent things as they exist or might exist in nature, rather than the foliage and the inhabitants of an inorganic and ungraceful realm of the fancy.

But, inasmuch as that Article did not state the whole case, nor classify and describe and rate all sorts of pictures, it follows of course that it has been misunderstood by hasty readers, who suppose that we claimed for pure and plain transcript of nature the

rank of greatest art. Now, this is so far from being the truth, that we prefer not even to give it the rank of great art, but to use the term *great* for that art only which is the work of the imagination of a great man.

We urged that faithful representation of nature is possible to men who are not great and who never will be great, that such representation is needed, and that it is a worthy and noble mission of art. It is not easy, it requires faithfulness and diligence and reverence and perception such as fall to the lot of few men, but these gifts are given to some who are not men of transcendent genius, and these gifts will make true and useful painters.

But genius is a thing apart. In no possible way can the work of a clever or talented man resemble the work of a great man, except in the direct imitation by one of the other,—an imitation easily seen through, and forever destructive of all merit in the work of the imitator. A bad time for art is beginning when it becomes the fashion to imitate the works of genius.

Do not suppose that all work that is not highly imaginative is reduced to a dead level of uniform merit. There is wide diversity in the natures of men, and large differences in the power of

* In the August number.